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Another Look at the Shot Sequence In President Kennedy's Assassination

By Hal Verb

**"The Knowledge of Things Lay Round
but Unperceived."**

Wallace Stevens, American Poet,
in One of His Poems on "Chaos."

**"The Least Initial Deviation From The Truth
is Multiplied Later A Thousandfold."**

Aristotle

At a John F. Kennedy Assassination Conference held in Washington, D.C., in October, 1994, I presented a talk titled "The First Shot in the John F. Kennedy Assassination was not the Missed Shot." This talk was subsequently published in the British magazine, *Dallas*, '63.

The talk and the article relied heavily – but not solely – upon the Zapruder film. Besides entering evidence contained within the Zapruder film, I offered eyewitness, ear-witness and other films (such as stills of the Willis #5 photo and Hugh Betzner's last of three still photographs he had taken). All of these were submitted to support my claim that the very first shot fired in the assassination was fired somewhere in the range of Zapruder frames 186 and 202 (although it was my firm belief at the time – and still is – that the precise frame at which Kennedy was struck by a bullet was Zapruder frame 189. The frames between 186 and 202 were utilized merely to place the exact moment within known and existing photos which would support this conclusion).

In the course of my talk (and article), I specifically drew attention to the Warren Report's conclusion, based upon the FBI's own analysis of the Zapruder film. As students of the assassination will recall, whether or not Oswald was in the sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Building, he (nor anyone else for that



matter) could not have fired a shot between Zapruder frames 166 up to and including frame 210 because a tree (along Elm Street) would've blocked a potential assassin's view of the Presidential motorcade as it proceeded down Elm Street. One exception that was pointed out by the Warren Commission itself was that for one very brief instant (at Zapruder frame 186)

the motorcade was visible from that sixth floor window.

It is true that a particular argument was that – indeed – an assassin had fired a shot the instant the hole in the tree became apparent. But even the Warren Commission argued against this position. Of course, upon reflection, without this Commission conclusion, it should be noted, clearly, that if an assassin had successfully fired through the hole in the tree at frame 186, a bullet would have struck Kennedy after Z-189 and not before. It has been shown that human reaction time (spotting Kennedy at Zapruder frame 186) would require at least three frames plus the firing time (several frames) exceeds Zapruder frame 189. Thus, this shot could not have been fired from the sixth floor window if solid evidence can be established that Kennedy was struck at frame 189.

This article will further demonstrate that, indeed, frame 189 is the precise instant for the very first shot fired in the assassination. In addition to this demonstration, I will also contend that what follows in my argument here will add another nail in the coffin of the notorious Zapruder film "alteration" theory.

I should note here that many years ago at a researcher's home in California the Zapruder film was shown and particular emphasis was placed on the early frames of the Zapruder film, that is, those frames just before 186 and up to frame 202 and beyond. The researcher was able to utilize stop-motion thus slowing down the film to examine particular frames. At that meeting were researchers Doug DeSalles (who wrote an excellent article, Dr. Gary Aguilar, Dr. David Mantik and myself.² I offered my analysis as to why I had singled out Zapruder frame 189 as being the very first shot and also the one striking Kennedy causing a non-fatal wound.

Of course, the controversy about whether the Zapruder film was authentic and not in any way altered or doctored was barely underway when I presented my analysis – specifically of frame 189. Note, how-

Kennedy Assassination Chronicles Vol. 7, Issue 2, Summer 2001

ever, that a leading proponent of the Zapruder film alteration, Dr. Mantik, was present and he did hear my analysis. It will be interesting to notice his reaction to my discussion of frame Z-189 and my further elaboration of my analysis presented in this article.

And now we come to the theme of this article which, on second thought, could have been retitled: "No Laughing Matter!"¹

When one re-examines the first day evidence in the murder of President Kennedy, there is something that occurred that either has largely been lost sight of or totally ignored by researchers. Essentially, all

the evidence presented below exists within the Zapruder film itself and is further confirmed by eye and ear-witness evidence relating to the first shot evidence.

Let us begin with the testimony of eyewitness Mrs. Barbara Rowland who was questioned by David Belin, the Warren Commission's Assistant Counsel (WC6,184). At the time of the assassination Mrs. Rowland was with her husband, Arnold Rowland, and was standing on Houston Street near the Records Building between Elm and Main Street.

Mr. Belin: All right, now, will you please tell me what happened as the motorcade went by?

Mrs. Rowland: Well, Mrs. Kennedy was wearing a blue - I mean a pink or maybe a rose - it was either pink or rose dress or suit, I couldn't say, because she was sitting. She had a pink hat or rose, the same shade as her dress.

And I remember noticing that the President's hair was sort of red, that is all. They were facing mainly toward the other side of the street and waving, and as they turned the corner we heard a shot and I didn't recognize it as being a shot. I just heard a sound and I thought it might be a firecracker.

And the people started laughing at first, and then we heard two more shots, and they were closer than the first and second, and that is all.

Mrs. Rowland's testimony, by itself, may not be proof that the first shot struck JFK, however, what follows should help confirm that this is, indeed, what occurred and provide sufficient reasons as to why "the people started laughing" immediately after the first shot.

Arnold Rowland did not testify but submitted a

report which was taken on the day of the assassination, November 22, 1963. He reinforced the observations of his wife especially as to what transpired precisely after the first shot. We should note that as Rowland's report was taken on the same day as the assassination and, therefore, his impressions would certainly be sharper and clearer, than, presumably, than Mrs. Rowland who testified five months later (April, 1964).

For Mr. Rowland's report, see WC16, 953, identified as CE 357:

Mr. Rowland: "...in about 15 minutes President Kennedy passed the spot where we were standing and

the motorcade had just turned west on Elm heading down the hill when I heard a noise which I thought to be a backfire. In fact, some of the people laughed and then in about 3 seconds a third report..."

Note Mr. And Mrs. Rowland both agreeing to hearing "laughter" after the first shot.

Now, add to the observations and experiences of the Rowlands the report of William E. Newman, Jr., who was standing with his wife, Gayle, on Elm Street about mid-way between Houston Street and the triple underpass, thus, providing him with a closer vantage point to witness the assassination than the Rowlands. Still it was not as close as Zapruder who was then filming the assassination.

From the FBI report on Mr. Newman (WC22, CE1432, Nov. 24, 1963):

"He [Newman] believed that when the President's car was approximately 50 feet from him proceeding in a westerly direction on Elm Street he heard the first shots fired. It was his belief that two shots were fired in rapid succession which he thought at the time was a firecracker.

The car was proceeding toward him and it seemed that the President's arms went up and that he raised up in his seat and started to look around - Newman first thought the President and Governor 'were playing some kind of a game' and suddenly realized they had been shot and that he was perhaps in the line of fire because officers started running toward the arcade directly back of him and his wife."

"It was his belief that two shots were fired in rapid succession which he thought at the time was a firecracker."

Here, again, Newman observes JFK's "arms went up" and after the first shot. This is exactly as seen and captured in Zapruder's film immediately after frame 189 and even up to and through frame 207 when a sign blocks our view. These are all bodily reactions to the first shot!

As a reminder, it should be noted that with the first shot striking the President, even those closest to Kennedy did not fully recognize the shot for what it truly was. Their reactions were to think of Kennedy as "playing around," so to speak.

Another instance of a belief that JFK, immediately after the first shots were fired, is somehow "joking" around can also be found in the FBI interview (March 18, 1964) of George A. Davis who was on the Elm Street Overpass at the time of the assassination:

"Mr. Davis heard a sound which he described as similar to firecrackers exploding. He stated they did not sound like rifle fire because they were not loud enough. All shots

were very close together. And he stated it was impossible for him to determine the number of shots. He stated his first impression was that someone had played a prank but then he saw guns in the hands of the Secret Service Agents with President Kennedy, saw President Kennedy slumped forward and the Police Motorcycle Escort maneuver swiftly about the area and he realized it was not a prank." (WC 22, 837 CE 1424)

In 1993, while in Dallas on November 22nd upon the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the assassination, I discovered two witnesses to the assassination who were even closer than Zapruder was or, in fact, closer than many of the individuals discussed in this article. One of these witnesses was John Templin. Templin was standing on Elm Street in front of the grassy knoll with his friend, Ernest Brandt. I helped identify these two witnesses by pointing them out in the Willis #5 still photo and also in Zapruder frame 202 (identical in time to Willis #5). Harold Weisberg, the noted assassination researcher, provided the dramatic evidence and proof of the two films equivalence which somehow "eluded" the FBI's photo "experts." (See Weisberg's *Whitewash* series for this proof).

In a letter to me, written in March, 1998, Templin related his experience at the time of the assassination:

"....as the motorcade past [sic] us about 15 to 20 feet we heard what appeared to be a motorcycle backfire. As it did, the President's shoulders came up and he slumped down slightly on the back of the seat. My first thought was that he was just acting and sort of playing the crowd. As the car went a few feet more, the second shot was fired hitting President Kennedy with such force that I could see his hair actually depart from his skull . . . my attention was to look behind us and see if we could see anyone or anything. We could not determine where the shots came from other than from our left."

Templin (continued in his letter):

"Did the first shot strike the President? Yes."

Was the first shot fired by the conspirators done precisely so that no one would know immediately what was occurring except for—and, obviously, the President himself?

Interestingly enough, Templin pointed out to me that while he believed that only three shots were fired, he stated that "the third shot missed everything."

Templin was never called before the Warren Commission and his observations are virtually barren when it comes to assassination literature (as well as his friend, Ernest Brandt).

Again, we note here that Templin believed (at first) that Kennedy was "playing" or "acting." Not realizing until later that the President was being struck by gunfire.

A Question: Was the first shot fired by the conspirators done precisely so that no one would know immediately what was occurring except for—and, obviously, the President himself? Recall Mrs. Kennedy's testimony that when she first looked at Kennedy he had a "quizzical look" on his face—and she was the closest person in a position to know what was happening with respect to the very first shot. Is it any wonder why so many did not know or even suspect Kennedy was hit by the first shot?

At Lancer's NID Conference in 1995, I managed to pose a question to Mr. Brandt who was one of several witnesses invited by Lancer to reveal what he had seen and heard. Mr. Brandt replied to a query by me as to precisely what he saw and heard during the assassination. His answer: "I thought the shots came from behind me – the pergola – where else could it have

come from?"

Where else, indeed! And Mr. Brandt is a firm believer in the Warren Commission!

The sobering reality struck the Dealey Plaza area like a firestorm – what they saw and heard was no laughing matter. Not then, and not for all time!

Welcome E. Barnett, a Dallas traffic policeman who had been standing south on Houston Street watching the traffic and the crowd, testified before the Warren Commission on July 23, 1964. Barnett told Wesley Liebler, the Warren Commission's Assistant Counsel, the following:

Liebler: "Did you see any of the shots hit the President?"

Barnett: Well, when the first shot – I was looking at the President when the first shot was fired, and I thought I saw him slump down, but I am not sure, and I didn't look any more, then I thought he was ducking down."

Again, even though Barnett was farther away than the above witnesses cited, he saw the President as the first shot is being fired and thinks the President is "ducking" (meaning that his first thought is that Kennedy hasn't been hit) Barnett's impression turns out to be incorrect but not what he observed if one pieces all the known film, eye and ear witnesses together. Each witness is accurate in his or her own way.

Another eyewitness, Sam Paternostro, a Dallas District Attorney, perhaps not as close to the actual assassination event but he is significant with respect to first shot evidence. Paternostro was on the second floor of the Criminal Court Building:

"He (Paternostro) estimated several seconds, possibly four or five or more, elapsed between the first report and the second and third reports. He said he observed President John F. Kennedy when he appeared to grab his head and thought at the time "He is well-trained"; then, when the other reports followed in quick succession, he



Detail from the Zapruder frame 260. The President is grasping towards his neck while many bystanders believe he is "playing" or ducking.

realized that the President had been shot and it was not a practiced action on the part of the President when he fell against Mrs. Kennedy and later into the rear part of the vehicle he was riding in." (WC24, 536, Jan. 20, 1964)

Note, here again, as consistently emphasized in this article, the emphasis on Kennedy "grabbing" (actually, the President was raising his hands toward his neck). Also, not to be overlooked is Mr. Paternostro's comment about Kennedy's "later (movement) into the rear part of the vehicle." This can only be a reference to Kennedy's reaction of his head and body violently thrown backward in his seats which is wholly in reaction to that fatal shot. This movement is clearly evidenced in the Zapruder film and makes one wonder why certain "alterationists" theorize that the backward motion of JFK was not observed by many witnesses.²

And, finally, if there were any doubts at all about first shot evidence which is that Kennedy was struck at Frame 189 by a non-fatal bullet, we have none other than Abraham Zapruder himself (not only in his testimony but what actually can be observed in his own film).

Refer to Zapruder's testimony (see WC Volume 7, p. 571):

Liebeler: "Tell us what happened as you took those pictures."

Mr. Zapruder: Well, as the car came in line almost – I believe it was almost in line – I was standing up here and I was shooting through a telephoto lens, which is a zoom lens and as it reached about – I imagine it was around here – I heard the first shot and I saw the President lean over and grab himself like this (holding his left chest area).

Liebeler: Grab himself on the front of his chest?

Zapruder: Right. Something like that. In other words, he was sitting like this and waving and then after the shot he just went like that.

Liebeler: He was sitting upright in his car and you heard the first shot and you saw the President slump over?

Zapruder: Leaning – toward the side of Jacqueline, For a moment I thought it was, you know, like you say, "Oh, he got me," when you hear a shot – you've heard those expressions and then I saw – I don't believe the President is going to make jokes like this. But before I had

a chance to organize my mind, I heard a second shot and then I saw his head opened up and the blood and everything came out —"

Indeed, it is my conclusion, based on these witnesses' statements and observations from the films and photos taken, that the first shot in the John F. Kennedy assassination was not the missed shot.

Notes:

1. If nothing else contained in this article suggests it, it should be absolutely clear by now that with all of the witnesses cited Zapruder's own testimony and film provide more than abundant evidence that Zapruder's impression of Kennedy "making jokes" is immediately after the first shot and this can be visually confirmed in the Zapruder film at Z-Frame 189 and the film sequence following it.
2. *Kennedy Assassination Chronicles* Vol. 5 Issue 3, Fall 1999 "Continuation of First Shot/First Hit Circa Z-190," a follow-up to Barb Junkkarinen's article on the same topic, Vol. 5 Issue 2, Summer 1999 "First Shot/First Hit Circa Z-190."
3. Dr. David Mantik, one of the staunchest believers in the "alteration" thesis, quite flatly (in *Assassination Science*, page 287) says (of Frames Z-314 to Z-321) that "no head snap is reported by anyone." Let those who make this later claim address their attention to the Zapruder film and speak directly with such witnesses as Mr. Paternostro about what they saw and heard.

